

“Part of Your Body is
Missing.”

Asma and Taylor

“Part of Your Body is Missing.”

[Asma has made a life for herself in the United States and continued to send support home when possible. However, previous selections have only begun to capture the feelings Asma has about the vast distance between her new family and the ones she loves back in Somalia. The following selections attempt to describe how Asma feels about this distance and the bridges she has been able to build despite it.]

A: My son, he had a... a global ball in his school—you know the global ball? [T nods] Um, the global, um... There is a, um, a toy, the ball toy—

T: Oh, okay, gotcha, like a globe.

A: Globe, yes.

T: Globe. Oh, okay, got it.

A: Sorry. We say it a different way...

T: No, it's okay.

A: Yeah, a globe, in his school. He take my hand and say, “Mommy” when I drop him out, so I have to, I have to take him to his class, I cannot drop out and leave, he's still a baby, and he told me, “Mommy, I want to you to show me where is Somalia.” I say, “Okay. Is here.” I show him the Somalian [draws in the air with her finger].

T: Yeah.

A: I say, “This is Somalia, and this is Indian Ocean, this is Djibouti,” I show the maps.

T: Yeah.

A: And then he say, “Hmm... Where you from?” [we laugh] I say, “I'm from Somalia, where are you from?” And he say, “I'm from here.”

T: Did he—can he point to the U.S. on a map yet, or no?

A: No, he didn't know.

T: No?

A: But I always talk to my mom, and I uh, my little sister, I told you she's working now in Somalia, I always talk to her and he always say, “Where is my—where is, uh,”—they call Auntie Habaryar [??] in my language—“Where is habaryar?” And I say, “Oh, she's back in Somalia.”

T: Yeah.

A: He say, “I want to talk to her.” Like, Friday, “I want to talk to her,” Like, “Okay, you wanna go back to Somalia? Can we see—can we go see her?” He say, “M-mmm.” [shakes head]

[In a way, that globe represents Asma's distance from her mother and sisters in Somalia. Even when she was in Syria, Asma struggled to stay in touch with her mother.]

A: There's people still using the paper.

T: Yeah.

A: You remember? Mails?

T: Yeah, I remember.

A: People still using the mails, not, eh, phones, like...

T: Or email or anything like that...

A: There is email, but there is no phones, but my mom—back home in Somalia, she never no computer, no emails, no...

T: Yeah. Right.

A: Not the way now.

T: Yeah. So...

A: And she doesn't have a phone!

T: So... Were there times in Syria when you didn't know where she was...

A: Where she was!

T: And you didn't...

A: A *year*. A year, I didn't—

T: Did you—

A: —Know her, *anything*.

T: Did you go a long time without talking to her because of that? Or did she *know* how to contact you?

A: She know only I'm with these people.

T: Right. So *she* had to contact you. That was the only way you could talk to her.

A: Last time, the last time she, I get her letter, and she get me letter? When we arrived in Syria.

T: Okay.

A: After that, she don't know what happen.

T: Yeah.

A: She don't know what the people left me?

T: Yeah.

A: She doesn't know, um, if I'm still living in Syria. And I don't know if she live, still, in Mogadishu, She doesn't have a mail, even.

T: Right.

A: No mail. [baby Hamila cooing]

T: She doesn't have an address.

A: Right, so yes, because Somalia, we don't use address.

T: Yeah?

A: If I send a mail, I send... Somebody's office.

T: Okay.

A: So that, that man who stay that office, or maybe who own that office, he does, he does have to company. [baby Hamila cooing]

T: Yeah.

A: Like company like, any company he have to. Like, "Popular People."

T: Yeah.

A: Not anywhere. So, he just have to look her. Who's this name, or she have to know I'm sending some papers there. So it was not easy.

T: And you didn't talk on the phone, you said?

A: No, no.

T: No? So you didn't hear from her, basically.

A: I didn't hear from her for year. By the time they [interviewers at the refugee office] make me crazy, asking, "Where is she, right now?"

T: Was that hard? Being all by yourself?

A: It was very hard.

T: [beneath her voice] Because you didn't know where she was...

A: Yeah, they give me—eh, I remember, three-two-four? I think it was three—radio? Radio station?

T: Yeah.

A: To go there and ask my mom.

T: Yeah.

A: I say, "This radio station in Syria. Is not gonna Somalia."

T: Yeah.

A: “I’m looking my mom in back home!” [laughs]

T: So they were—they had you go onto the radio...

A: Yeah.

T: To like, ask for your mom to contact you?

A: Yes. They told me, “If you ask your mom a contact. If you try to find your mom, and suddenly she have a money she can come to you, we can—” They, they told me, “We can [??] to bring her here.”

T: Mm.

A: “But if you find your sisters and your mom, they c—when they come Syria, we gonna put you together. Same file.”

T: So they were trying—So they were trying to get your *whole* family to come together?

A: Yes. They want it like that. They say, “You’re very young. If we put you in America, you will be, you gonna be in trouble.”

T: Yeah.

[In a world full of technology that can make communication possible, Asma still struggles to remain in contact with her sisters and mother. However, they do communicate through IMO—an app similar to WhatsApp—and Facebook, as well as occasionally speaking to each other on the phone or through video chat.]

A: My sisters, I talk with them sometime.

T: Yeah.

A: But we don’t have, eh, a lot of, uh...call phones.

T: Mhm.

A: Maybe we call every two, three months, check up sometimes. Yeah, we don’t talk a lot, they just busy, they have, and they live in the far, for Mogadishu.

T: Mhm.

A: Two, they living in Afgoooye.

T: Two are in Afgoooye.

A: Yeah. Yeah. Mm.

T: With families, right? Those are the ones with families, right?

A: Yeah, they have kids, yeah. They have families. And the last one, I told you, we are so close, the last one. Because she finish the college in Khartoum.

T: Mhm.

A: She finish the college in Khartoum, and that one is, is close to me.

T: Yeah?

A: Yeah. The youngest one is close to me. And my mom. Yeah. [sadly] The others we just checking up. “How you doing? How is everything?” Like that. And when I have a new baby, they call me to get-congratulate me.

T: Yeah.

A: And just to talk to me little bit. But they’re fine.

T: They’re fine?

A: They’re fine, they’re busy for their own houses. They’re not have a lot of money, and not a lot of, enough everything, but they raising the kids. And their husband is with them. Yeah. That’s why I’m not worried about, because they have husbands?

T: Mmm.

A: So I, but I-I worry about my youngest one and my mom, a lot.

[But “worry” doesn’t capture the depth of her emotion.]

A: I really—Sometime at home I cry.

T: Yeah.

A: I just miss them. Before I come here, I don’t know if I tell you, I used to cry every Friday.

T: Every Friday?

A: Yeah. Because, back home, in my country, Friday is family day. Did I tell you that?

T: No.

A: Friday is family day. Like you have Saturday and Sunday off, right?

T: Yeah.

A: So Friday and Thursday we had off. We don’t have Saturday and Sunday there.

T: Mm.

A: We off Friday and Thursday. So our week back home it starts Monday—no [laughs] sorry, it starts Saturday.

T: Yeah.

A: So our week back home starts Saturday, Sunday, Monday, Tuesday... and Thursday and Friday is weekend. Our weekend.

T: Wow.

A: Yeah. Is everything different, I told you. [laughs]

[fade]

A: We all eat together, in the floor.

T: Mm.

A: No table—no. People small bowls—no. Big—what they call—big—kind of like I don't know how to English [laughs]. Um... Big bowls, not a bowl, the thing putting the food food on...

T: Like platter?

A: Platter, yeah. Big one? I will put everything we cook there, and we sit in the floor...

T: And everybody eats together.

A: And did you ever see how they eat...Arabic people...[trails off]

[fade]

A: And I *missed* that thing. Since I left my mom, even if I sit on the floor and eat together in the floor with some friend, I still missing my, my family.

T: It's not the same.

A: I still missing my mom, sister, my other sister, left, right, side...

T: Yeah.

[pause]

A: I used to cry every day, even, even at work.

T: Yeah?

A: I'm working, at the job, the first two years I come to United States it was very hard for me.

T: Yeah?

A: Every Friday, I'm doing something—I told you I used to for a-a-a job for fixing the phones?

T: Fixing the phones, yeah.

A: Sitting at my table and taking the screws and the phone, and my tears on the table, tk, tk, tk...

T: Missing them?

A: Yeah, missing them, and then I go, I *run* to bathroom and clean my hands, my eyes, my face.

T: Yeah?

A: Wash it, and I come back and my eyes is red and my friend tell me, “Why are you going to cry?” [laughs]

T: Yeah.

A: And I say, “Yes, I do.”

T: Yeah?

A: “I tell you, your crying, it’s, it’s done. So you continue crying every Friday!” [laughs, composes self quickly] Yeah. I used to keep crying every Friday.

T: Yeah. So Fridays are hard. [mumbles]

A: Until I get visa and have my kids. But still now, sometime, I get emotional I cry.

[Asma misses her mother especially. We spoke briefly about my own mother, and how I spend months at a time without seeing her, and even *that* is hard. Asma has seen her mother *once* in eleven years, and these eleven years have been major ones in her life. As such, this focus on her mother—not only the sadness of missing her, but also the commitment to bring her here, to the United States—was a central focus of our project.]

A: I am so excited to be here, but the thing it hold me back...It’s coming my mind every *night*, every *day*...

T: Is your mom.

A: Is my lovely one. Yeah.

T: And so it makes sense—

A: I don’t, I don’t worry—yeah.

T: —to start with that.

A: Yeah.

T: To you.

A: I don’t worry about my sisters, my other one, they have other one, their own life, they busy. But my mom, her young one is almost twenty-something.

T: Yeah.

A: And she doesn’t have no one support her. Except me.

T: Yeah.

A: So I *want* to be here.

T: And you’re—and she’s not here.

A: Yeah.

T: So...

A: That's—

T: So your whole life is because of your mom. And so we need to start with your mom.

A: Yeah. Yeah.

T: Okay. Do you, would you feel comfortable starting with that story, with telling me that first?

A: Yes, yes! In this college—Central Ohio Technical College—I *wish*, my wish today, and in [2018] my wish—the day I will graduate, my mom to be my side.

T: Yeah.

A: That's my wish. To come *before*, the day I graduate on the stage, I want my mom to be on my side. If it doesn't happen... It's not—I get a degree, and still I feel that something is wrong. Something is... is missing in my, in my life. Yeah. Mhm.

[pause]

T: Okay.

A: Mmm. The important thing is, is my mom now. It's...

[pause]

T: Yeah.

A: As long as you're missing someone... How much you love, how much you're having fun, how much you... Even when you become yourself... Something is missing. Yeah. You're a daughter, you can feel it. How...How but if one year, you didn't see your mom.

T: Yeah.

A: Yeah. Is part of your body is missing.

[But she has managed to reunite with her mother and youngest sister once: a few years ago, Asma flew to Sudan to attend her sister's graduation from medical school. The trip *to* Sudan was exciting and empowering enough in and of itself.]

T: Yeah.

A: Not to Somalia.

T: Not to Somalia.

A: I went to Sudan.

T: Oh, okay.

A: Because my, my, my sister was graduating there. Um, her bachelor degree, medical school.

T: Yeah.

A: I took my two kids!

T: You did?

A: Yeah! I was three months... My little one was three months—[Muna]? [Muna], she was three months only. And all my family surprised, “How you take the kids by yourself, on your own?”

T: That’s insane! Because I was on, I was on like a thirteen-hour flight from New Zealand to across the country and across the ocean...

A: Twenty-three hours.

T: That’s insane! I remember with *one* baby, parents were super stressed out. With *two*... That’s amazing.

A: Twenty-three hours I was, I had not reached my family, not here—in the middle. And three flights. Three flights.

T: With two little kids.

A: With two little kids.

T: A tiny baby...

A: A tiny baby... she was here [mimes holding her]. And one is only... thirty months.

T: Geeze.

A: Thirty months, the first one.

T: Could he walk?

A: He walked. Yeah. He walked, he walked that time. [we laugh]

T: Little toddler, toddlin’ around...

A: Yes, I have so many pictures, in the airplane... He was just playing and making the other people laugh.

T: [we laugh] I love it! Way to go!

A: Yeah.

T: That’s so impressive.

A: And everyone see me, “Are you alone? That’s so...” And I say, “I’m strong, because I wanna visit my mom and my sister for a long time, I did not see them.”

T: That’s amazing.

A: And I was strong woman, I can take it. My husband say, “I can buy you your ticket, but I don’t have money to buy mine, too. You wanna go?” I say, “I wanna go, it’s a beautiful journey, the one I support my whole life.”

T: Yeah.

A: “She’s graduating”.

T: Yeah.

A: “I wanna stand by her side. Secondly, the second I miss my mom for long time I not see her.”

T: Yeah.

A: “This moment is the right moment, I have to go.”

[And Asma’s arrival—and reunion—was all the more powerful after that exhausting trip.]

A: So, going back home—going back Sudan—was so exciting. I see my mom...Um...There’s a lot, there’s a lot of [??], I was just...crying and crying and crying in the airport.

T: Yeah?

A: I couldn’t even handle my baby. My mom took off my belt for the baby?

T: Yeah.

A: And she hold the baby and she, she, she let me to sit on the floor, and she say, “You’re very tired, and, and plus you’re crying, just sit and relax!”

T: Yeah.

A: And I say, “I don’t want to sit here, just...take me somewhere!” [laughs] And they take me to the restaurant in the airport.

T: Yeah.

A: So, and we just drink some drinks and...and go home. I couldn’t believe, I just, “Is it dream or just true?”

T: Yeah.

A: To see your mom. And...And my mom told me, “Hey, you just like the way you left me, you didn’t even change. Just you get a little bit fat for the babies!” [we laugh]

T: Yeah.

A: “But your face, your every, is just the same, same.”

T: Yeah.

A: And I tell her, “How do you expect I will be back? I told you, you, your daughter grow up and her face will changing? It’s just eleven years!”

[At the beginning of the previous clip, Asma first said she was going home before correcting herself and reminding me that she actually went to Sudan. This slip, though, speaks to a crucial word in Asma's experience. She defines "home" in the following selection from a later interview.]

A: Anywhere?

T: I-I want you to define "home" the way that you would define "home." There-there's nothing specific. Just how-how, in your brain, when I say "home," what do you see?

[pause]

A: I see my home [laughs].

T: Your house, now?

A: Yeah. My house. This is my house.

T: Has that idea changed?

A: Um...

T: Like if I'd asked you what home was two years ago, would you still have said your house?

A: Yes. That's the perfect place, I have it. I mean, if I—if you say, "Home." I remember my mom.

T: Your mom?

A: [murmurs] Yes. Yes. That's, that's what I was calling, the home. Before I get my kids.

T: Before kids.

A: Yeah. But growing up now, having my own home. I mean... [pause] It's a home to, because I'm a mother.

T: Yeah.

A: [sighs] But my home... The one I miss every day, is my mom's house.

T: Your mom's house?

A: Yes.

T: Is it... The ghost house? Or just... whatever house has your mom in it?

A: I can called the worry, the "worry house"—I cannot say "ghost," but I can call—

T: —It's not a ghost—

A: —worry—

T: You don't want to call it the ghost house anymore?

A: [sighs] Because there is some sweet people there.

T: There's still people in that house? In the beautiful house, you know what I'm talking about?

A: Beautiful. Yeah....

T: The one that was destroyed in the war—

A: Oh! The one who built it, my father, my father, for us?

T: Yeah.

A: Oh my gosh, that's the—the...

T: Is that home?

A: It, it come ghost house. If you go there now—

T: Right, it's a ghost house. Not that house. That's not home.

A: Not that house. If... When you say, "home," I don't have a specific *home* to remember.

T: Yeah.

A: I don't have a specific home to remember, unless than that house. The house, I stay...A few years. And then it turn, after a few years, it turn like a ghost.

T: Yeah.

A: Even broke the windows, the roof, everywhere...

T: So that's not the house. It's just...

A: That's the ghost house. I cannot call anymore house. But when you say, "Home," the only thing I remember is my mom.

T: Just your mom?

A: And...different houses.

T: Mom and different houses?

A: Yeah. Different houses. Including this one, too [laughs]. Yeah. I mean, I told you my life, I never s-stayed...

T: In one place—

A: In one place? That's my brain until now.

T: Yeah.

A: When you say, "home?" I look back like at a lot of different pictures in my mind.

T: But it's your mom that's there in all of it.

A: But it's my mom that's there. That's my mom there. When you say, "home," hm, the only person I remember for my home, for my mom, and...and my sibling.

T: Your mom and your sisters?

A: Yeah. Wherever they are, I call the "home." Yeah.

T: So you kind of have two homes now, right?

A: Mhm.

T: Where your mom is, and where your kids are now.

A: Yeah.

T: Because you're a mom.

A: Yeah. Yeah.

T: That's beautiful.

A: But I want, I want to try to combi...One day, here.

T: Put them together. For sure.

A: Put them together here. Yeah.

T: For sure. Okay.

A: Yeah. But I'm wishing that.

T: Yeah.

A: That's my hope.

T: Okay. Fingers crossed.

A: Yeah.

[Combining those two homes, then, is Asma's central concern. On top of this, the continual violence in Somalia only increases her worry. Every time she hears about violence in her country, it only makes her more afraid for her family—and more committed to bringing her mother here.]

A: There's... messy...There's a lot of mess back home and I don't understand.

T: Yeah.

A: I'm-I'm just gonna. [laughs]

T: Yeah?

A: I...I was trying to wrote, last night.

T: You were doing what?

A: I was trying to wrote.

T: To write? You were writing?

A: Yeah. Last night. It's not, um...I don't know if you can understand. I was like...Not paying attention how to spell.

T: Yeah.

A: But...

T: It's okay.

A: Just writing something.

T: Yeah.

A: I, I do it, um, I wrote, I say, "My leg feeling—my feet are very cold, but my head is warm."

T: Yeah.

A: Um... "And the reason is...Something I can't understand. I think ans—the only answer, the only one who does, has the answer, I think is the dead people from my home."

T: Dead people?

A: From my home. I mean, it's someone that, can...can-can they answer you? Your question?

T: No.

A: Never. They never can answer your question.

T: Yeah. And you think they have the answers—

A: What happen to my country, what happen to my country...

T: Yeah.

A: Why we not serving ourself? Why are we not solving our problem? The only dead people can know. So may—we never get *any* answer. So we maybe we never get solved.

T: Yeah.

A: Yesterday, what happened to Nairobi, I feel very sad.

T: Yeah.

A: Nairobi's not my country.

T: Yeah.

A: But they say, they say, "Al-Shabab."

T: Mhm.

A: You know Al-Shabaab, where they from? It's from my home.

T: [murmurs] From Somalia.

A: Why? And the man I saw in the TV he look like my family. He look like my people.

T: Yeah.

A: Like my people Somalia. I can see the skin, the shapes...If he's other African or he's Somalian.

T: Yeah.

A: It's clear, right?

T: He looks like—he looks like your people.

A: Mhm. Yeah.

T: And you don't know why.

A: And I don't know why.

T: Yeah.

A: When I see the TV and the kids sleep? I wrote paper.

T: Yeah?

A: I say, "Only dead people can answer my question. Maybe. Only dead people can answer my question. [pause] What is make you to do the other countries? Not even your country. And we are Muslim, and my religion...God never forgive you if you kill somebody with no reason. If you do *anything* else, God *never*, never forgive you if you kill someone who didn't do to you anything."

T: Yeah.

A: What kind of these people? Where they from? How they raise? [pause] And my answer, nobody have my answer. No one have my answer. That's what I think. Only dead people have it because dead people, they—after they died, they never gonna give you answer.

T: Yeah.

A: Ay, I'm just...After yesterday, I feel heartbroken. And it happen *every* time in Mogadishu, you know the capital?

T: Mhm.

A: Every time. Every time. Last year, October four, maybe November four, I don't remember exactly, or maybe September four, they, they put a big bomb in the middle of the, of the shopping place. Business place. Business place.

T: Yeah.

A: And five hundred people died. *Five hundred people*. What the sad thing show me, I saw—I think I can show you the internet next time—I saw two boys.

T: Yeah.

A: I saw two boys, maybe one is older one year. Maybe the same...Like [Muna] and [Muhammad]. Two boys. Carrying their, their mom's head. Their mom's head. Only this head.

T: [whispers] So sad.

A: The mama's body is left, the only head left.

T: Yeah.

A: There's nothing else. How can the two, eh, babies, like almost eight years, nine years, carry that body mom?

T: Yeah.

A: Can you believe the world is happen like that?

T: Yeah. [No.] [pause] How does that make you feel?

A: Very sad. I don't want to lose my mind sometime, I, I try to forget it.

T: Yeah.

A: Because my family is still there.

T: Yeah.

A: And I don't have ability to bring them here.

T: Yeah.

A: Yeah. Very sad. I see, my—I, I wrote yesterday—"My happiness is not complete. Half in happy, and half is sad."

T: Yeah.

A: "And how long it will be. I don't know how long it will be. I can be laugh, like, "Ha-ha-ha..." Happy.

T: Yeah.

A: I never get very happy, like what, what do you call happy. You see me, I'm laughing? But that's not most laugh.

T: Yeah.

A: Yeah. Because half of me is very sad. Half of me is not here. Half of me, the, the place I left it. Half of me is not safe. So...That's—that's why I wrote, like, "My feet are very frozen, and my head is warm."

T: Yeah.

A: So you're sleepy, you're not sleepy.

T: Yeah.

A: You're happy, you're not happy.

T: Yeah. Because *half* of you is somewhere else.

A: Yes.

[Sometimes, that missing is so profound that Asma considers returning to Somalia to check on her mother. This selection begins with a conversation she had with her son about that desire to see her mother again.]

A: "Yes, I want to go there." [Muhammad] "No, Mommy! Don't go!" [laughs] And I say, "But I need my mom."

T: Yeah.

A: "You want your mom, I want my mom."

T: Yeah.

A: "She will come, she will come, Mommy. She will come."

T: Yeah. Does that make you feel better when he says that?

A: Yes, a lot. I feel like my son is wishing, maybe come true.

T: Yeah.

A: That's why I'm feeling.

T: Yeah.

A: And that wish will one day, maybe one day will come true.

T: Yeah. This year?

A: I wish, oh my gosh. My mom come this year. I mean so much wishing for God if my mom come this year.

T: Yeah.

A: You know, when God give you something beautiful, you was wishing but you don't know it's gonna be happen? Like my religion, that person—not—If you need it, you can fast. You know how to fast?

T: Yeah.

A: Fast, like you don't eat? You don't drink...

T: Until...

A: Until sunshine...

T: Yeah.

A: Yeah. That's the gift I will do for him—

T: To fast—

A: To thanks God. If my mom comes.

T: Here's hoping.

A: I'm-I'm just hoping, yeah.

T: I am, too.

A: Well thank you so much.

T: You, me, and [Muhammad]. We'll hope together.

A: Aw, thank you so much. I feel that.